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CARIBOU, MAINE

BEFORE THE

HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

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Good morning, Committee Chairman Miller, members of the committee and Maine's own Congressman and Ranking Minority Member, Mike Michaud. When I testified to the Veterans Affairs House Subcommittee September 2012, I was pleased to report the good news about Project ARCH at Cary Medical Center, our community hospital in Caribou, Maine. Now, in June of 2014, I am delighted to inform you that the good news just keeps getting better. The original goals of Project ARCH were to expand access to eligible Veterans for healthcare services, including specialty care and hospitalization, close to home. Now, after nearly three years of working with Project ARCH, we can confirm that not only can we deliver on these goals but we can go beyond.

Over the past three years Cary Medical Center working together with VA Project ARCH staff, have enrolled some 1,400 Veterans who experienced more than 3,000 consults at our hospital. If we assume that these same Veterans would have sought out VA care at Togus, our single VA hospital in Maine, hundreds of miles away from Cary, travel costs alone could have exceeded \$600,000. But the benefits of Project ARCH go well beyond travel savings, we are saving lives and improving quality of life for our Veterans in Northern Maine.

Listen to what Peter Miesburger, U S Air Force Retired, had to say about Project ARCH. As Peter explains, "It's the best thing since peanut butter." Peter is a 77-year old Korean War Veteran. He suffered a broken hip on January 30th when he fell at his home in Caribou, but, thanks to Project ARCH, he didn't have to worry about a 250-mile ambulance ride.

"It was miserable outside, snowing, cold, a typical northern Maine winter day," said, Peter, a former Air Force firefighter who retired in 1974. "God only knows what would have happened." He said. Such trips have been the standard procedure for Veterans in Northern Maine and given the unpredictable weather conditions six months out of the year, those trips could be life-threatening.

John Wallace is an Army Veteran and at 67 had been suffering with a bad knee ever since he jumped out of a helicopter in Vietnam. Project ARCH encouraged him to seek treatment and he successfully had arthroscopic knee surgery to alleviate his chronic knee pain. "I'm feeling great, although my knee can still predict the weather," he said. "Any veteran you talk to up here, we've all been very happy with the results."

These are just two of hundreds of examples of how bringing care closer to the homes of Veterans near family and friends in familiar surroundings can make a difference. Veterans are also taking advantage of preventative care such as colonoscopies and mammograms.

Key to the success of Project ARCH at Cary Medical Center has been the long-term relationship that we have built with VA Healthcare and in particular with Maine's Togus Veterans Hospital. VA Togus, with support from Cary, opened a VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic, the first in the nation, some 27 years ago. The clinic provides Primary Care for Veterans living in Aroostook County, Maine. Having the ability to work with the clinic and Togus has allowed Veterans to remain in the VA healthcare system. This is important to Veterans who overwhelmingly endorse VA Healthcare when they have the chance to experience it.

While we can speak to the remarkable success of our experience with ARCH we have also faced challenges. Being a rural, community hospital, we struggle with the 14-day rule. This requirement of the VA to have the Veteran seen by a specialist within 14 calendar days of authorization is simply not realistic. We have however, dramatically reduced wait times and because we are flexible, are able to respond to unique circumstances, such as emergent or urgent care. The volume generated by Project ARCH has now allowed us to recruit a second full-time Orthopedic Surgeon and two full-time Oncologist/Hematologists, a great benefit for not only the Veterans but our community.

We recognize that Project ARCH is a 'Pilot'. Some have said that the results we are presenting are anecdotal or that with only five locations across the nation the numbers are not high enough to make any predictions for a national expansion. We respectfully disagree. We believe that Project ARCH has tremendous potential to save the lives of our nation's honorable and courageous Veterans, save millions of dollars, and, ultimately advance the health status of millions of Veterans nationwide. We urge congress to extend Project ARCH to expand the program in other rural areas of our country where Veterans live hundreds of miles from the nearest VA facility.

Project ARCH is working. Ask our Veterans in Northern Maine. There is no doubt that Veterans living in remote, frontier areas of our country are at a tremendous disadvantage when it comes to accessing care. Even with access to care closer to home Veterans must be made aware of the options and after years of staying in the shadows, they must be encouraged to come forward. It takes time and effort to build the trust of Veterans, many of whom have never approached the VA for healthcare. At Cary Medical Center we made this a top priority and we have demonstrated that when treated with respect, gratitude, and compassion, the Veterans community will not only respond but they will create an unbreakable bond and reach out to their comrades who may be in need of care.

We truly believe that the system we have built at Cary Medical Center and our relationship with VA Healthcare is a model for the nation. We would love nothing more than to share our success and model with other rural areas of America.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to present this urgent request for the extension of Project ARCH. It is just the right thing to do.